

SOUTH LANE

- B O A R D N E W S -



Regular Session March 4, 2024

M E E T I N G S U M M A R Y

Recent issues with employee payroll, health savings accounts, retirement contributions and other finance issues dominated proceedings at the South Lane School Board's Monday, March 4 meeting.

The meeting's public comment period, which almost exclusively featured comments from teachers in the District expressing frustrations over the recent financial issues, began with comments from Daniel Henson, a nine-year South Lane veteran and teacher at Al Kennedy High School. Henson, a former union representative for district teachers, said his love of the District made the comments he was about to deliver quite difficult.

Henson listed several of the complaints that would come up again throughout the evening:

- That retirement contributions had not been made correctly to the state's PERS (Public Employee Retirement System) accounts or employees' 403(b) accounts, sometimes for up to six months.
- That employee W2 forms were reportedly filed incorrectly, leading to delays in tax filings.
- That payments were not made to employees' health savings accounts (HSAs) in a timely fashion
- That employee reimbursements had not been filed "for weeks"
- That employees had reportedly been placed on incorrect pay schedules
- That attempts to purchase equipment or supplies had been denied due to late or erroneous payments

Henson stated that the list of grievances "continues." He acknowledged that a March 1 email sent by Assistant Superintendent Brian McCasline "nominally recognized" the issues but did not alleviate the hardship they'd caused or as yet correct all the issues.

Audrey Stepp, a third-year teacher, said that district staff had been dismissive or not responded to her concerns about the issues, adding that a lack of confidence has her checking her paystub for errors each pay period. Trust in district staff is broken, she said, and the teacher's union is demanding action.

Ruby Davey, who has taught at Harrison Elementary for seven years, said that the issues have been severe enough that she's had colleagues asking her for help due to her knowledge of the contract teachers have in place with the District. She said she helped create a document with hyperlinks to help other teachers navigate the issues and ensure they were being properly

compensated.

Lisa Sherman, a special education teacher at Lincoln Middle School, listed a litany of concerns and said that they've caused her to lose trust in the District to the point where she can no longer recommend that others come to work there.

"We want transparency and accountability, and we want it now," she said.

Emily Quindry, who represents teachers and staff with their union, thanked McCasline for offering an action plan that includes steps to fix the issues, though she added that union leadership "remains leery" that the changes will be made.

"District leadership will need to show proof of every repair in order for us to believe the promises that were made," she said.

McCasline, who offered the evening's Superintendent Update in the absence of Superintendent Yvonne Curtis, said that while he wouldn't be discussing individual issues, he's very aware of the issues that need to be quickly resolved. He acknowledged that changes to the way PERS contributions have been dealt with have been "inconvenient and confusing" but wished to assure district staff that these issues would not negatively impact individual retirement accounts.

McCasline said he was aware that deposits to employees' HSA accounts had been made later than usual and that he was seeking answers as to why that occurred. Discrepancies with sick and personal leave balances were the result of "an error as we transitioned from one system to another," he said, an issue that has since been resolved.

"We've been working with staff closely this week, and I've met with both (teachers') associations to work as partners," he said. "We will meet later with both associations to make sure that the documents we produce to fix these errors are transparent. It breaks my heart to know there's a lack of trust among staff, but we will repair that."

In a detailed update from the District's business office, Director of Finance Celia Gowing stated that payments had been deposited into the PERS system that are only now being reflected in individual accounts. Working to ensure that the contributions match what's appearing on employee paychecks take a little longer, she said.

With regard to employee leave balances, she said that an incorrectly checked box had caused double deductions to be taken for employees that took leave in January or February. The error was corrected, she said, and the District is working to ensure that the error didn't result in any lost pay for employees.

With regard to payroll, Gowing stated that five paychecks were issued in February with issues that needed to be resolved. She said each was resolved and that the District is "not aware of other paycheck problems at this time."

She added that pay changes for some staff members in January and February came about as a result of changes to the state's tax withholding tables. She said her office checked the withholdings of concerned staffers and informed them of the changes, adding that staff members who want to make changes to their withholdings should file a new W4 form.

With regard to questions as to why some paychecks don't appear to directly reflect the number of hours an employee has worked, Gowing explained that the district pays on an annualized basis, a system that calculates the hours an employee is expected to work, divides that number by the number of pay periods in the school year and pays the employee accordingly.

The District's new finance system, Gowing said, examines an employee's calendar, which can lead to different pay figures because each pay period does not always include the same number of workdays. Attempts by employees to simply divide their hours worked by the number of pay periods will thus be inaccurate, she said.

Gowing said the District has emailed staff members who questioned their paychecks or other documents and sent out an email to all staff explaining such changes.

"We have come up with the realization that we do need more professional development to help

everyone understand how their hours are reflected,” she said. “And we’re also working on a “how to read and understand your paycheck” presentation.”

She also said the District is working on a PERS FAQ sheet to answer common questions about how PERS contributions are made. The District is required to post information about PERS contributions annually, she said, but she added that the District will report such information more frequently in the future.

With regard to payments to employee health savings accounts, Gowing said the change to the new system meant that payments were made later than usual to the accounts. The District made its payment to the accounts’ vendors, she said, who delayed their own payments for an unknown reason.

“They should be done sooner than that; we’re not sure what the issue was,” she said.

Gowing later offered a general summary of her responses to the issues.

“There are individual issues and questions that have been resolved and others in the process of resolution,” she said. “We have reached out to staff and made appointments to meet, and these will be ongoing. We will continue to monitor and follow up on these issues.”

The next Regular Session meeting will be on April 8, 2024.

Article Written by: Jon Stinnett

South Lane School District | 455 Adams Ave, Cottage Grove, OR 97424

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